

Green Scene: Taking Nature's Weakening Pulse

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Last week the provincial government, in collaboration with several non-governmental organizations, released an excellent report, "Taking Nature's Pulse" (available at www.biodiversitybc.org). This report provides an overview of the status of freshwater and terrestrial biodiversity in BC. It makes a compelling case that our province hosts a globally significant diversity of flora and fauna – but also points out that, without immediate action to conserve it, our wildlife and the ecosystems on which they rely will remain vulnerable to rapid deterioration in the face of increasing human pressures and climate change.

One of the ecosystem types considered to be especially significant are estuaries where rivers discharge fresh water into the ocean. Although estuaries make up only 2.3% of the length of BC's coastline, they are estimated to support 80% of all coastal wildlife. I have always felt that we are very fortunate to have Burrard Inlet on our doorstep. Even people who are not regular bird-watchers enjoy spectacular views of bald eagles, osprey and great blue herons along the shores of Burrard Inlet. Estuaries tend to become areas of human settlement so it's important, as we develop our shorelines, that we leave some natural habitat in place and take measures to protect water quality.

With its rugged coastlines, islands, extensive mountain ranges and broad valleys, BC contains a wide variety of ecosystems that are estimated to support over 50,000 species. Of these species, only 7.6% have been assessed by biologists; of those assessed, fully 43% are of such low and diminishing population numbers that they are considered to be of "conservation concern". Some species have already disappeared from BC; these include the greater sage grouse and the western pond turtle. The spotted owl, now estimated to be down to only three breeding pairs, may be the next species to disappear.

When people think of species at risk, they tend to think of large mammals living deep in the forest rather than the smaller creatures that could be living closer to their backyards. While we no longer have grizzly bears grazing in the sedge along the shore of Burrard Inlet or spotted owls flying through Mundy Park, we still have a number of species at risk with whom we share our environment in the Tri-cities area. These include tailed frogs, Pacific water shrews, red-legged frogs, purple martins, barn owls, short-eared owls, band-tailed pigeons, peregrine falcons and great blue herons.

Many people are surprised to learn great blue herons are one of our species at risk. Our local herons are a unique subspecies that do not migrate south each year. Although herons feed on fish for much of the year, a scarcity of such food in the winter forces them to turn their attention to meadow voles. The fields at Colony Farm Regional Park provide critical winter feeding areas for local herons. Without these fields for winter sustenance, our heron population would be much diminished. These same fields also provide foraging habitat for owls. The lesson here is that protecting important habitat goes a long way to ensure the continued survival of species at risk.

Similarly, providing other elements of critical habitat can make all the difference. Shoreline development along with the arrival of the introduced European starling, a competitor for nest sites, almost eliminated purple martins from the province. Once volunteers installed nest boxes for purple martins, as has

happened at Rocky Point in Port Moody and elsewhere, the martins have rebounded and are now expanding their territory in BC.

While our province has a rich heritage of wildlife, we are very poor in species protection. In addition to a weak federal Species at Risk Act, the BC is one of only two provinces with no provincial endangered species legislation. It's disappointing the Conservation Framework announced last week by the provincial government as the mechanism to protect species at risk contained no new legislation. While volunteers can make a difference by, e.g., lobbying for critical habitat protection and building nest boxes, we also need action from the provincial government.